

An Uphill Struggle?

Disabled Graduates and Career Service Engagement

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The concept of career is evolving, jobs for life are no longer commonplace and the dearth of graduates means that there is more competition for fewer graduate level jobs. The culmination of these trends means that graduates have to consider their career path earlier and revisit their decision on a frequent basis, a change which warrants academic research.

Research exploring the career paths of disabled graduates was conducted as part of a Ph.D thesis exploring the transition from higher education to the labour market, for disabled graduates. In particular the research focused on careers, workplace adjustments, legislation and the benefit system. While work on disability is growing in popularity, the combination of employment and disability is scarce. This, coupled with the growing importance of gaining knowledge about graduate experiences, in a changing higher education market, highlights the importance of this research.

Today careers services provide a plethora of information and resources with which students can engage. The importance of early career planning while at university is paramount, usually leading to more successful labour market engagement (Purcell et al, 2005). It has been shown, however, that different categories of student engage in different ways, and to different extents with the careers service. This research therefore used interview to explore disabled graduates' experiences of careers services at university.

The research found various methods in which the participants undertook career investigation. Some participants chose not to take up career support for two main reasons. The main rationale provided was that they generally *'could not be bothered to think about careers'* and were instead focused on getting their degree. Secondly, accessing the careers service was viewed as unnecessary because the graduates were already decided upon their future career path. Those participants who failed to engage with the careers service utilised family and friends for advice. When questioned why they chose this method the usual response was that family and friends understood their impairment and knew their capabilities. The implications of using family and friends as support for entering the labour market are negative for equal opportunities; those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have access to influential personnel in large companies and therefore less likely to make the right contacts.

For those students and graduates who do not access the careers service the possibility of mainstreaming provision through inter curricular courses and talks has potential. Building in careers information and planning into degree courses means that the student does not have to take 'extra' time to consider future employment. This provision is particularly pertinent for disabled graduates as the research found that they often have a greater number of tasks to juggle and finding the time and energy for extra activities, however fruitful, is limited.

A few participants from the sample voluntarily attended careers sessions while a student and graduate. The majority, who attended, however, did not find the careers service useful. Poor careers information and support was a common problem among the sample. The disabled graduates often felt that careers staff did not have knowledge of the support they would be entitled to in the workplace or how to help them manage their impairment and employment. This finding was enhanced when careers advisors were interviewed. The majority of careers staff were not aware of specialist

disabled graduate schemes, such as the Scope Graduate Leadership Scheme. While some knew where to find out the information the graduates needed, others seemed more reluctant to seek out information.

While the graduates reported lack of support from the careers service, careers staff also found graduates lacking. A major issue that all careers advisors reported was that students and graduates were unaware of their skills and how to take the step of converting their grades into marketable skills for employers. In terms of disabled graduates, careers advisors reported that disabled graduates often had 'more' skills as they were used to juggling studying and managing their impairment simultaneously; their challenge was then to ensure these skills were marketable to employers. Often the careers advisors would give advice about disclosure and how to 'spin' their impairment, to make it seem advantageous to a potential employer.

The trend which decentralises the careers service may help to address some of the concerns of disabled students. To meet the needs of disabled students, career services have provided mentoring schemes, leadership programmes and web based resources especially for disabled students (AGCAS, 2009). The increased use of the internet by larger employers and net based PPD sessions will improve accessibility for disabled students. The integration of careers information into the core of degree courses will remove the need for disabled students to access it as an extra circular service is also a positive step. It is not yet possible, however, to ascertain the impact these measures will have had on the usage of careers services by disabled students. More significantly, however, is the need to address the lack of knowledge among careers staff and poor skill marketability of graduates. Given the current economic climate and the changes to higher education, the importance of career planning is augmented, especially for disabled graduates who already have a lower employment rate than their non disabled counterparts. This is of greater importance as research has shown the positive impact careers service engagement has upon a students' career, if disabled students and graduates

are not able to benefit from this service, then they are at a distinct disadvantage in the labour market.

References:

AGCAS. 2009. *What Happens Next? A Report of the First Destinations of 2007 Disabled Graduates*. Disabilities Task Group.

Purcell, K. et al. 2005. *The Class of 99: A Study of the Early Labour Market Experiences of Recent Graduates*. London: DfES.